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2 million hours of job safety

Union, management praise work at We Energies construction site in Port Washington

By JOEL DRESANG

jdresang@journalsentinel.com

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The 380 union trades workers who are building the power plant in Port Washington have another reason to celebrate Labor Day this weekend.

Workers there have surpassed the milestone of 2 million hours of work without an accident serious enough to keep anyone off the job.

Project managers say the achievement is a tribute to the workers' skills, training and discipline - and it's remarkable for a project of such magnitude.

"A project like this, where you're putting large steel members, piping, electrical components, you're putting them all up at the same time, there's a lot of inherent risk," said Chuck Taylor, project manager for Washington Group International, the Idaho-based contractor whose subsidiary, Wisconsin Power Constructors, is building the second of two We Energies plants in Port Washington.

"It takes a lot of cooperation from the craft," Taylor said. "They're the reason why you're successful in achieving this kind of a safety record. They're the ones that are in harm's way, day in and day out, performing tasks."

When completed, the \$660 million project will include a 26.4 million-cubic-foot building housing four 210-foot-tall stacks. The new natural gas fueled units replace a 1935 coal plant and will generate enough power for more than half a million households. The first unit started up in July 2005. The second is supposed to be completed next summer.

Safety has been crucial to staying on schedule, said Doug Wetjen, project manager for the We Power Projects at Milwaukee-based We Energies.

Not only is safety a priority because it's the right thing for workers, Wetjen said, but it helps keep costs lower in terms of insurance rates and down time and rework. Cutting corners, he said, doesn't cut costs.

"We have a strong work ethic on the project team here. It's almost human nature to try to get the work done first and think about safety second," Wetjen said. "The work force here has done a good job of not only building a quality project but acknowledging that if they take a few extra seconds, they can do something safely."

Trade unions intend training to be one of the ways they can distinguish their workers from non-union competition, and safety is an emphasis in that training, said Lyle Balistreri, president of the Milwaukee Building & Construction Trades

Council.

"We punch that home every single day," Balistreri said. "We want people to think safe, to have an attitude toward safety, especially on those kinds of projects, because things can happen, and they happen very, very quickly and then, you know, it's all over."

Besides training workers to be safe, members of the council do monthly safety inspections of the power plant construction sites and have been encouraging workers to speak out more to one another about safety concerns, Balistreri said.

Safer working conditions often result when unions and managers have collaborative relationships, said Mary Beth Maxwell, executive director of American Rights at Work in Washington, D.C.

The pro-labor advocacy group just came out with its third annual list of "Partnerships that Work," which includes SCA Tissue North America, based in Neenah.

Maxwell said that as she has seen elsewhere, the rapport between SCA and its union, part of the United Steelworkers, has resulted in a safer workplace with less employee turnover and greater productivity.

"The union is a huge ally," Maxwell said, "in terms of a trained and skilled work force, better health and safety provisions and just getting the job done better, faster, more efficiently."

Taylor pointed out that out of about 50 non-union managers and administrators on the power plant project, only four are safety professionals, suggesting how important the workers themselves are in maintaining safety.

"We don't want anybody rushing out here, hurrying," Taylor said. "These guys are actually working with safety as a top priority. They're working efficiently, and in the end, it's a much better product."

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